



Revisiting the Korean Tree-Trimming Incident

By RICHARD A. MOBLEY

In August 1976, two Americans were killed while supervising a work party at Panmunjom. The incident involved a detachment of U.S. soldiers who were trimming a poplar tree in the joint security area to improve visibility between checkpoints when North Korean troops attacked them. In response, the United States raised the defense readiness condition, reinforced the peninsula, and chopped

down the tree. The incident represents a case study in crisis planning and joint operations prior to passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act.

The attack is worth studying because the United States extracted an apology, albeit weak, from the North Korean leader, Kim Il Sung, who characterized the incident as regrettable. But the official records, which began to be declassified in 1994, shed new light on the incident. They reveal profound uncertainty about the intent of Pyongyang but an equally deep American desire to retaliate. Indeed, simply chopping down the tree was the mildest action considered by the National Security Council. Washington wanted to keep

Commander Richard A. Mobley, USN (Ret.), served as chief of indications and warning at U.S. Forces, Korea, and is the author of *Flash Point North Korea: The Pueblo and EC-121 Crises*.

close tabs on the operational commander; its desire to send the right signal had not wavered since Vietnam. Moreover, the Joint Chiefs and General Richard Stilwell, USA, Commander in Chief, United Nations Command (UNC), were concerned about rapid escalation and protecting the force chopping down the poplar. Evidence also suggests the desire to deter through exceptional measures taken for weeks after the tree was felled.¹

The Korean Context

The so-called second Korean War ended by 1976. Hundreds of provocations along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and in the South subsided.

Pyongyang did not repeat earlier acts such as the attempted assassination of President Park Chung Hee, seizure of *USS Pueblo*, or shootdown of a Navy EC-121 aircraft with 31 crewmen on

the Central Intelligence Agency concluded that Pyongyang might have been attempting to influence the 1976 election

board. Indeed, the situation calmed enough by 1970 for President Richard Nixon to order the withdrawal of 7th Infantry Division.

Although the Central Intelligence Agency did not believe Pyongyang intended to invade, it warned “We are not at all sanguine that [intelligence sources] could provide a clear and timely warning of a North Korean attack.” At that time, over half of the Korean People’s Army (KPA) was combat ready and within 50 miles of the demilitarized zone. The intelligence community held “that Pyongyang could mount a sizable attack with little or no warning.”²

The communist propaganda intensified in March 1976 with Kim proclaiming his intention

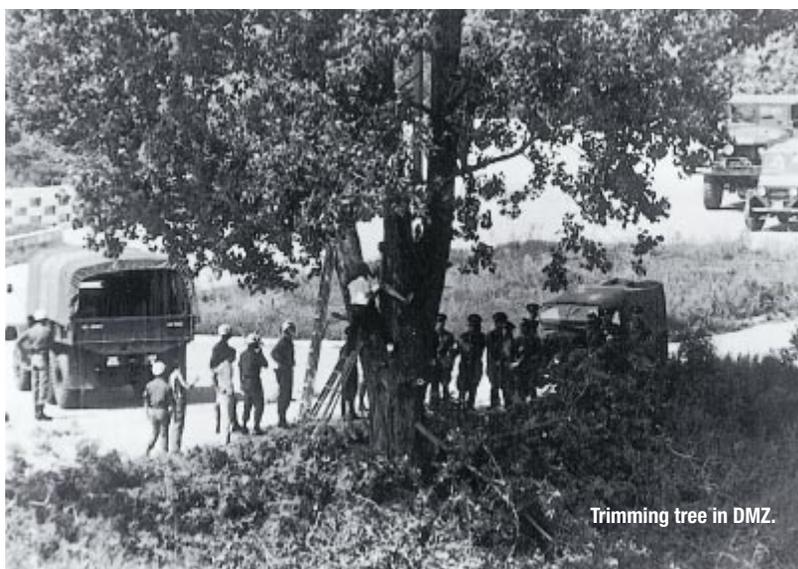
to “stir up world opinion more vigorously” by publicizing “U.S. criminal barbarities.” He sought to “make the Korean question the focal point of attention both in Asian and world affairs.” In daily broadcasts, Pyongyang accused America of creating a grave situation. Shortly after an exchange of fire along the demilitarized zone on August 5, North Korea claimed that the United States and South Korea had “completed war preparations,” the first such statement since 1969.³

An assessment by the Central Intelligence Agency concluded that there were two proximate causes for increasing tension in the joint security area. Pyongyang wanted to support its claim that the United States was the major danger on the peninsula. The Nonaligned Movement summit in Colombo, Sri Lanka, which was meeting when the incident occurred, would provide the venue for the assertion. In addition, Pyongyang might have been attempting to influence American opinion during the 1976 election.

August 18

North Korea revealed its sensitivity in mid-August. A few days before the incident, United Nations Command sent unarmed Korean maintenance workers to determine how to remove the tree. Communist guards warned them to leave it alone. As a compromise, the command planned to trim rather than chop down the tree. That would allow UNC checkpoints 3 and 5 to see each other at the least. The command accordingly dispatched a 15-man tree-trimming team (three officers, five laborers, and seven security troops) into the joint security area at 1030 hours on August 18.

The report on the incident relates a dramatic series of occurrences over a six-minute period. Two KPA officers and nine guards appeared. When informed by the Americans that the tree was only being trimmed, a communist officer voiced his approval and the guards began to offer advice. But at 1050 hours the North Koreans ordered the work to halt and threatened the UNC personnel. Thirty guards appeared and attacked Captain Arthur Bonifas, the detachment commander. Witnesses saw them bludgeon Bonifas with the blunt end of an ax as he lay on the ground. The communists also attacked First Lieutenant Mark Barrett and other soldiers with axe handles and clubs. Photos reveal two instances where seven and nine KPA guards clustered around soldiers and struck them with ax handles and clubs as well as their feet and fists. Bonifas and Barrett died at the scene and several other Americans were injured.



Trimming tree in DMZ.

U.S. Army



A response to the attack was approved within two days and ready for execution in three. Because of the 13-hour time difference, activity in theater occurred as Washington slept. During the day, the command sent back operational reports and forwarded photos of the event. Moreover, various responses to the incident were considered, including chopping down the tree. In addition, Stilwell proposed issuing a strongly worded protest to Kim Il Sung in his notional role as supreme commander of the Korean People's Army.



U.S. Army

On August 18, the Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, telephoned President Gerald Ford in Kansas City, where he was attending the Republican convention. Other members of the cabinet, including the National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, were located in the capital, though the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, was at home in Michigan recovering from surgery. Ford decided not to return to Washington but directed the cabinet to formulate a strong response. With this tasking, Kissinger chaired a meeting of the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) late in the afternoon.

The Central Intelligence Agency decided that the attack was premeditated. Although Pyongyang did not want war, it was looking for an excuse that Kim Chong Il could use at the Non-alignment Movement summit to denounce the United States in an attempt to weaken its resolve over Korea. Moreover, the intelligence briefing indicated that North Korea could engage in further controlled acts of violence, depending on the response to the tree-trimming incident.

Kissinger guided the Washington Special Action Group through various courses of action that would “be a good lesson for them. . . . The important thing is that they beat two Americans to death and must pay the price.” He added, “It will be useful for us to generate enough activity so that the North Koreans begin to wonder what those crazy [Americans] are doing or are capable of doing this election year.” With this mindset, he endorsed some options, deferred others, and ignored a third set.⁴

The Secretary of State proposed resurrecting an exercise involving unarmed B-52s flying over Korea. The Department of State had earlier opposed such a move to avoid provoking China. Kissinger urged alerting the bombers, and Admiral James Holloway, the acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, agreed. The exercise could be conducted within three days. The Secretary also recommended raising the defense readiness condition, which was striking because it would have been the first time it was changed in response to activity in North Korea. After Holloway explained the impact of going to DEFCON 3, he urged that it be raised that night.

After reviewing other options, the Washington Special Action Group decided to augment United Nations Command with F-4 aircraft from Japan, including Wild Weasels armed with anti-radiation missiles. Other actions would be considered, such as deploying F-111s from the United States, but they would have to await their next meeting, scheduled for the following morning. Finally, the group agreed that the tree must be cut down. It also concluded that Stilwell should

communicate directly with Kim Il Sung; it denied his proposal to protest.

With these decisions, a flurry of messages was released overnight to unified and specified commanders. DEFCON 3 was set for Korea and F-4s were ordered to Osan, B-52s on Guam and F-111s at Mountain Home Air Force Base were alerted, and the *USS Midway* carrier task group in Yokosuka was readied for deployment. Meanwhile, both Stilwell and the chargé d'affaires of the U.S. Mission were scheduled to brief President Park on the following day.

Park wanted to teach the North a lesson "without use of weapons"

August 19

American forces went to DEFCON 3 early on August 19. The balance of the day was spent reaching this level. Major General John Singlaub, USA, Chief of Staff, U.S. Forces Korea, noted that other steps to enhance readiness quickly followed:

Nuclear and conventional artillery and missiles of various calibers were carried forward by road and helicopter to prepared concrete bunkers. Listening posts just south of the DMZ were activated and reconnaissance patrols were mounted. . . . A quick scan of tactical radio net produced a multi-band cacophony of Korean and American voices. This was obviously not a training exercise.⁵

Pyongyang sent conflicting signals but its media remained defiant, faulting Washington for provoking the incident as a pretext for war. Comments before the Military Armistice Commission on August 19 presented a similar view, including a claim supported by photographic evidence that its soldiers had also been injured.

North Koreans taking axes from work crews.



U.S. Army

Despite its bravado in public, the communists reacted defensively to the increased defense readiness condition. Kim Il Sung put the army, Worker-Peasant Militia, and Red Guard Youth on a war footing. Pyongyang conducted civilian air raid drills on August 20. While divisions along the demilitarized zone were immobile, naval and air force units went on alert. A total shutdown in tactical air activity began on August 18 and continued until August 23, perhaps because of the inclement weather in the North. These actions were characterized by Stilwell as "reactive, urgent, and defensive," indicating "genuine apprehension over possible UNC retaliatory military actions."

Meanwhile, Stilwell met with Park, who concurred with American actions. Deliberate and calm throughout the meeting, Park wanted to teach the North a lesson "without use of weapons." Referring to the posturing by Washington after the seizure of *USS Pueblo*, he warned that a show of force by itself would not persuade. He warned that United Nations Command must be fully prepared should North Korea attempt to prevent the tree from being cut down. To guarantee that outcome, Park offered to integrate 50 special forces who had multiple black belts into the ranks. When Stilwell suggested that the operation might occur too quickly for the North to respond, Park opined that it would be better to conduct an operation that punished the KPA guards without using firearms. Stilwell agreed to consider the offer, and ultimately these special forces personnel were integrated into the operation as regular liaison soldiers.

A preliminary plan emphasizing speed and surprise was completed that night. An engineer force with 50 to 60 unarmed ROK soldiers would conduct the operation on or after August 21. Backup would include the authorized 35-man security force, an infantry company from 2^d Infantry Division stationed near the joint security area, a Korean infantry company, a Korean or American rifle company in UH-1 helicopters over the southern approach to the demilitarized zone, and a task force of one mechanized infantry and two tank companies located south of the Imjin River. The operation would take 45 minutes and commence between 0720 and 0730 hours.

Stilwell also addressed the risk of escalation, a concern that was raised in Washington on August 19. If the communists threatened to defeat the South Korean special forces unit, Stilwell would introduce the American rifle company with clubs to allow ROK troops to withdraw. If the North resorted to pistols, United Nations Command "could respond with mortar and artillery fire on known or suspected North Korean installations



U.S. Army

Attackers dispersing.

just outside the joint security area to allow the UNC troops to withdraw from the fight.” However, if the North actually attempted to overrun the joint security area in a concerted ground attack, Stilwell warned it would be “ill advised” to try to stop the onslaught in this particular area. He recommended using the backup forces to facilitate withdrawal of U.N. forces from the joint security area while delivering heavy artillery fires on KPA targets outside the area: “If the other side starts shooting, the mission becomes one of rapid extraction of our forces from close contact, relying primarily on artillery covering fires.”⁶

The WSAG meeting on August 19 began with a contentious discussion of possible actions. Kissinger had heard radio reports on a Pentagon statement that military action was inconceivable. Determined to signal U.S. anger, he warned that “the President will hit the ceiling when he hears that, because I told him we would be discussing possible military actions and that is what the President wants.” On that note, the Secretary repeatedly steered the meeting to military responses with admonitions on failing to act: “If we do nothing they will think of us as the paper tigers of Saigon. . . . If we do nothing there may be another incident and then another.”⁷

The Washington Special Action Group reviewed the proposed B-52 missions. Holloway explained that the aircraft would fly from Guam to within 43 miles of the demilitarized zone and drop their radar bombs before returning. To ensure that North Korea discovered the bombers, the Joint Chiefs would have them fly high enough to be detected on radar. Kissinger agreed to clear the proposal with the President. Meanwhile, F-111s and the *USS Midway* task group deployed.

Holloway then went through a list of other measures to be implemented coincident with or independent of efforts to chop down the tree, including firing an Honest John surface-to-surface missile or artillery barrage. Both suggestions had disadvantages: the former was inaccurate and the latter invited counterfire. Nevertheless, Kissinger asked the Joint Chiefs to consider artillery fire against the communist barracks just outside the joint security area.

The Deputy Secretary of Defense, William Clements, offered another option as the meeting continued: a SEAL operation against an unspecified target along the west coast of North Korea. “They would be wondering what happened and who did it.” Holloway balked. He believed that this option posed a danger: “If we pick a target which is significant in their view we would have a 50 percent chance of doing it without getting some people killed. The North Koreans are in a high state of alert. . . . we might have difficulty getting the guys out.” Kissinger remained focused on the artillery barrage.⁸

This last WSAG meeting ended with a decision to continue contingency planning and move the F-111 aircraft and *USS Midway*. The group sensed the need to do something quickly and have precise guidance for Stilwell in case the situation escalated. But an exchange between the Secretary and one member revealed the concern that events could get out of control. Kissinger opined, “One always assumes the unlimited willingness of opponents to take risks. . . . We are 200 million people and they are 16 million.” In response the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Morton Abramowitz, said, “They could overawe us locally.”⁹

The Deputy National Security Advisor, William Hyland, observed that strong differences existed in Washington over the plan developed by Stilwell. He reported that the Joint Chiefs supported the plan:

*out of loyalty to the field commander and in recognition that we must make a strong show of manhood in an area we were driven out of two days ago. The Chiefs, however, recognize that there are severe risks and there could be casualties. Bill Clements does not support the Stilwell plan; he feels it will lead to a major fight and that the Koreans are in effect baiting an attack. . . . The third option would be to ignore the tree and [later] attack the North Korean barracks with artillery fire. A further option unanimously opposed by Clements, the Chiefs, and I think Habib would be to conduct an artillery attack at the same time we were chopping down the tree. . . . A final option would be to conduct the Stilwell tree chopping plan and, if it runs into trouble, to withdraw and then attack the North Korean barracks with artillery.*¹⁰



U.S. Army

U.S. soldiers returning two days later.

Stilwell and Singlaub shared the concern “that the operation stood a fifty-fifty chance of starting a war”

The proposal to shell the barracks was reviewed by the Joint Chiefs, who cautioned against it in a starkly-worded memorandum.

While there was sufficient artillery for the mission (batteries along the demilitarized zone could destroy the target with a hundred rounds), resorting to artillery during the operation would

leave the force vulnerable to retaliatory fire. Moreover, the barracks would probably be vacant. More critical, the communists enjoyed a 4 to 1 ratio in artillery tubes in the immediate area.

Implementing the Plan

Despite these differences, Washington adopted the plan on August 19. The Joint Chiefs approved the proposal from Stilwell with guidance that it be conducted “quickly and aggressively” starting at 0700 hours (local time) on August 21. They also agreed that two KPA drop barriers should be eliminated unless it delayed the cutting operation or increased risks. The same message directed Strategic Air Command to initiate B-52D training sorties along the demilitarized zone at 0630 hours on August 21. The first cell of three bombers would fly at medium to high altitudes to facilitate radar detection. The flights would continue through August 25 with a daily visit by a cell. U.S. Pacific Command would protect the bombers using fighter combat air patrols.

United Nations Command likely received the flash precedence approval message from the Joint

Chiefs at midmorning on August 20. That afternoon, five groups of four F-111s would start arriving in Osan from Idaho. The F-4 squadron had arrived the previous day. The carrier task group would be underway for the Tsushima Straits within the next few hours, comprising *USS Midway* and its air wing, four frigates, and a cruiser.

Stilwell completed the planning and movement of forces in country. Under the final plan, according to Singlaub, disparate units had to move simultaneously:

Altogether, a force of 813 men would be involved. . . . Task Force Vierra . . . would conduct the actual tree cutting . . . three batteries of American 105mm howitzers were to be moved across the Freedom Bridge north of the Imjin River. Another three batteries of ROK heavy artillery would be positioned just south of the river in clear view of North Korean positions. The gunners, Stilwell said, would have “rounds in the tube and hands on the lanyards.”¹¹

And a lot of events would be occurring simultaneously in the air. Singlaub continued:

[A] reinforced composite rifle company . . . would be orbiting aboard twenty Huey helicopters a few hundred meters south of the DMZ, supported by twelve AH-1G Cobra gunships. Tank-busting F-4 Phantoms would be prowling at a slightly higher orbit. F-111 medium strategic bombers would orbit still higher, and be clearly visible to Korea radar. . . . At the precise moment of the tree chopping . . . B-52 bombers from Guam would be moving ominously north up the Yellow Sea on a vector directly to . . . Pyongyang. In the Sea of Japan . . . [USS] Midway would launch forty aircraft that would vector north above international waters.¹²

Stilwell and Singlaub shared the concern over escalation. As the latter subsequently noted, “It was my estimate, shared by many of the staff, that the operation stood a fifty-fifty chance of starting a war.” If the communists attacked and tried to overwhelm the tree-chopping forces, Stilwell planned for rapid extraction of the team under artillery covering fire.

On the evening of August 20, key members of the UNC staff manned the command center in preparation for the next morning. To preclude Washington micromanagement, they cut potential communications links between the President and subordinate commands.

For Washington, the balance of the day passed uneventfully now that the key decisions were made. However, two F-4Es equipped with GBU-15 laser guided bombs were ordered to fly to Osan. The Joint Staff considered destroying the poplar tree or a North Korean target with the guided bombs, and the aircraft may have been sent with that in mind.

Enter Paul Bunyan

The tree chopping was planned to start at 0700 hours, August 21 (1800 hours, August 20, Washington time). The North Korean guards appeared surprised and did not interfere. Although at one point 50 KPA soldiers gathered just outside the joint security area, they did not enter it.

Pyongyang immediately demonstrated a more conciliatory attitude, requesting a meeting of the Military Armistice Commission only hours after the tree was chopped down. In the 15-minute conference, the senior KPA officer delivered a high-level message to Stilwell flagged from Kim Il Sung as supreme commander. It admitted that "It is regrettable than an incident occurred." It proposed that "an effort must be made so that such incidents may not recur. . . ." In a second note, the KPA representative added that the tree trimming was a serious provocation. The embassy commented that the meeting was "calm and quiet." The national-level review also commented that the letter from Kim Il Sung was "exceptionally mild, almost conciliatory in tone."

North Korean media also avoided escalation. The authoritative *Nodong Simmun* stressed keeping the peace and coverage of the incident became somewhat more restrained. Nevertheless, United Nations Command pushed for punishment of those guards responsible for the murders and guarantees that the incident would not be repeated. Pyongyang counterproposed that personnel on both sides be physically separated along the demarcation dividing North and South. Guards would henceforth be located only in their respective zones of responsibility. North Korea would remove guard posts and barrier gates from the UNC portion of the joint security area but

would need its own access road. On September 6, 1976, the sides agreed to the basic division.

Pyongyang remained on a heightened state of alert as negotiations continued in part because U.S. Forces remained at DEFCON 3. Yet within days of chopping down the tree, Commander in Chief, Pacific Command, and the Joint Chiefs began thinking about an end to the crisis. Training sorties by B-52s over Korea dropped from daily to weekly. Only two or three bombers would fly in each cell, and F-4 aircraft equipped with GBU-15 bombs departed in early September.

The Joint Chiefs evidently tried to release other assets to DEFCON 4. The Kadana-based F-4 contingent would soon depart but leave its Wild Weasels behind. Along with 14 of the 20 F-111s, these aircraft would depart in mid-September. The six remaining F-111s would deploy to Australia for an exercise in October. The *USS Midway* carrier task group would remain on station in the southern approaches to the Tsushima Strait.

Singlaub ordered U.S. Forces Korea to remain at DEFCON 3 until September 8, when the North agreed to a set of new security procedures for the joint security area. With the lowered defense readiness condition, *USS Midway* returned to Japan.

Lessons Learned

A formal apology on the part of North Korea is rare. How did the United States manage to get one? While at the time many decisionmakers believed the incident was deliberate, some saw the American deaths as an accidental rather than willful act. And still others thought that the event was a provocation that got out of control. Since Kim Il Sung had not planned for the situation to result in the loss of life, he could admit that it was regrettable. He did not have a vested interest in opposing or retaliating for cutting down the tree.

The operation succeeded because the standard of success was low. The United States did not expect a reaction by the communists other than passivity as the tree was felled. No reparations or return of crewmen had to be negotiated.

Ironically, one of the last crises Kissinger faced involved the same country as the first. As National Security Advisor, he had helped formulate the response to the downing of an EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft in April 1969. To be credible, he said the United States must react to provocations quickly, even when the desired forces are not available. Accordingly, he originally pushed to chop down the tree on August 20 and was determined to avoid the impression of posturing like earlier responses in similar crises.

The Secretary of State knew what he wanted out of the WSAG meetings. While endorsing the chopping down of the tree, he proposed other

Engineers cutting down disputed tree.



U.S. Army



U.S. Army

Securing the area.

measures, such as increasing defense readiness and B-52 training missions. Kissinger simply ignored more extreme courses of action proffered by the Joint Chiefs. Both the relatively small nature of the provocation and the desire to avoid escalation were partly responsible for limiting the scope of potential reactions.

Planning for responses to the incidents involving *USS Pueblo* and the EC-121 aircraft was complex because the options ranged from shooting down fighters to attacking every North Korean fighter base. A simple plan was selected to chop down the tree. The hardest part, moving ground forces into position, was firmly controlled by the land component commander. Organizing B-52s, F-4s, and F-111s did not appear that difficult. But if the Joint Chiefs had intended to direct the capabilities in the theater, doctrine and planning would have been severely tested. However, since artillery was the weapon of choice in the event of escalation, contingency planning by one service was much easier to execute.

Recalling the micromanagement by officials in Washington who had reacted to the seizure of *Mayaguez* the previous year, Stilwell took steps to head off the tendency to skip echelons in the command and control system with high-level queries.

The response to the tree-trimming incident succeeded because it was well planned, simple, and executed to achieve surprise. The operation generated sufficient forces and a state of readiness

to deter escalation. Moreover, President Ford restrained the communists by taking the unusual step of increasing the level of defense readiness. And for a leader whose center of gravity was his army, Kim Il Sung was far more threatened by this development than by naval and air operations following the capture of *USS Pueblo* and loss of the EC-121 aircraft. The Nation had learned from its earlier encounters with Pyongyang. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ These events are recounted in John K. Singlaub, *Hazardous Duty: An American Soldier in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Summit Books, 1991).

² Central Intelligence Agency, "DMZ Incident," August 18, 1976, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and Pacific (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ford Presidential Library), box 10.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Minutes of Washington Special Action Group, "Korea-North Korea Tree Incident 8/18/76 (2)," August 19, 1976, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and Pacific (Ann Arbor: Ford Presidential Library), box 10.

⁵ Singlaub, *Hazardous Duty*, pp. 371-72.

⁶ Message from Richard G. Stilwell, "Joint Security Area Incident," August 19, 1976, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and Pacific (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ford Presidential Library), box 10.

⁷ Minutes of Washington Special Action Group, August 19, 1976.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Memorandum from William Hyland to Brent Scowcroft, "Korea-North Korea Tree Incident 8/18/76 (2)," August 19, 1976, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and Pacific (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ford Presidential Library), box 10.

¹¹ Singlaub, *Hazardous Duty*, p. 373.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 373.